



# Beckett as Marsyas

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Daniel Albright  
University of Rochester

### Beckett as Marsyas

Let me begin with a story about the origin of wind music. There was a satyr named Marsyas, so pleased with his skill at playing the *aulos*, a reed instrument recently invented by Minerva, that he challenged Apollo to a music contest, to be judged by the muses. Apollo won, and was so enraged by Marsyas' temerity that he roped him to a tree and flayed him alive--his whole body was one wound, his raw nerves and lungs and quivering organs exposed to the air (as Ovid tells the story in the sixth book of the *Metamorphoses*). This suggests that a stringed instrument, such as a harp, has a character different from that of a wind instrument, such as an oboe. And it suggests that expression is a dangerous goal in the arts: the expresser may find himself most horribly exhibited, ex-pressed, pressed out.

For Apollo, music is research, an inquiry into systems of correspondences. Music and astronomy are similar investigations of the proportionality of the cosmos: for, according to the Pythagorean tradition, the pitch-ratios of vibrating strings are direct analogues of the ratios of the crystalline spheres on which the planets and the stars whirl. But for Marsyas, music is wind, breath, *pneuma*, *ruach*--animating spirit, feeling made sound; Marsyas was a satyr, and a satyr's grossness, sexual panting, clings to his music. The flaying of Marsyas can be read as a literalization of the sense-immediacy of expressive music--music that cuts to the quick of the player and the listener. The right response to Apollo's lyre is transcendental calm, for it grasps and re-presents the whole zodiac; the right response to Marsyas' aulos is to convulse in a dance-orgy, or in a spasm of pain. In this sense, Marsyas won the music contest, at great personal cost: by inflaming Apollo with a convulsion of anger against temerity, Marsyas proved that the ethos of expression can overcome the ethos of transcendental harmony; Apollo's sadistic suppression

of the sensuousness of expressive music is itself an expressive act. Similarly Jorge Luis Borges demonstrated, in his story "Deutsches Requiem," that Germany won the second world war: "What matters if England is the hammer and we the anvil, so long as violence reigns . . . ?"<sup>1</sup>

The voice of Marsyas is continually heard in twentieth-century music. Arnold Schoenberg wrote an orgy for the naked revelers around Aaron's golden calf, as well as musical depictions of (1) a drill penetrating a brain, in *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912); (2) an epileptic seizure, illustrated by a storm of colored lights as well as music, in *Die glückliche Hand* (1913); and (3) the insertion of a hypodermic needle directly into his own heart, following an infarction, in the String Trio (1946). Even Paul Hindemith, who could be a somewhat stolid, matter-of-fact, *sachlich* kind of composer, wrote an opera in 1919 called *Mörder, Hoffnung der Frauen* [Murderer, Hope of Women] to a text by the painter Oskar Kokoschka, in which the central action is the pressing of a red-hot brand onto a woman's flesh; Kokoschka advertised the play with a poster he drew, showing two people flayed alive: a man stands on a fallen woman, his foot half covered by her fat breast, his hand clenching a dagger; the woman's hand, more lobster claw than hand, seems to be groping for the man's groin. Both large figures, and the scrawny dog behind them, are drawn with vehement cross-hatchings, as if the musculature and nerve-structure were popping through the skin. For Kokoschka, the sexes are united by the desire to tear each other apart; as Yeats put it, paraphrasing Blake, "sexual love is founded upon spiritual hate."<sup>2</sup> Kokoschka once explained that he preferred anorectic models "because you can see their joints, sinew and muscles so clearly, and because the effect of each movement is modelled more emphatically with them"<sup>3</sup>; and for Kokoschka, as for any Marsyan artist, the search for the truth requires a peeling-away of the flesh.

In Beckett's work, the singing-voice of Marysas, coarse, coaxing, sometimes rising to a shriek, is often heard. One of the running gags of his first published novel, *Murphy* (1938), is that sex is always described with the technical vocabulary of music:

The decaying Haydn, invited to give his opinion of cohabitation, replied: "Parallel thirds."

Yes, June to October . . . their nights were still that: serenade, nocturne and albada.

He kissed her, in Lydian mode, and went to the door.

Celia said that if he did not find work at once, she would have to go back to hers [i.e., prostitution]. Murphy knew what that meant. No more music.

This phrase is chosen with care, lest the filthy censors should lack an occasion to commit their filthy synecdoche.

Miss Counihan sat on Wylie's knees . . . and oyster kisses passed between them. Wylie did not often kiss, but when he did it was a serious matter. He was not one of those lugubrious persons who insist on removing the clapper from the bell of passion. A kiss from Wylie was like a breve tied, in a long slow amorous phrase, over bars' times its equivalent in demi-semiquavers. Miss Counihan had never enjoyed anything quite so much as this slow-motion osmosis of love's spittle.<sup>4</sup>

This confusion between sex and music is so great that, when the narrator tells of Murphy musing back on his old life with Celia, on his old affection for "his musical scores and instruments" (p. 189), we perhaps wonder whether Murphy might not mean something else entirely.

Marsyas the seducer appears in *Murphy*; Marsyas the screamer appears in Beckett's last full-length novel, *How it is* (1961). This text describes how the narrator spends his time crawling naked through mud, losing his sack of provisions, becoming forlorn and helpless, until he finds another naked man sprawled in front of him: the narrator flings his arm over the man's buttocks, and starts to torture him. Eventually the narrator and his victim work out a code, according to which various stimuli, such as fingernail twisting in armpit, or can opener blade gouging into buttock, yield specific responses:

table of basic stimuli one sing nails in armpit two speak blade in arse three stop thump on skull four louder pestle on kidney

five softer index in anus six bravo clap athwart arse<sup>5</sup>

The narrator has converted the man into a human keyboard, a pipe organ: a certain area of flesh, made to hurt, will register, through a kind of mechanical tracker action inside the subject's nervous system, as an emission of wind--a song, a mutter, a screech.

This is the whole dream of expressionist art, stylized to the point of parody: Munch, Schoenberg, Kokoschka, Grosz, are all people with long fingernails and sharp can openers, eager to dig into the audience's flesh. When the great musicologist Theodor Adorno heard Schoenberg's *Erwartung* (1909), a monodrama about a madwoman who has killed (or who hallucinates that she has killed) her lover, the music sounded like a sort of cerebral accident, a stroke:

The first atonal works are protocols in the sense of psychoanalytical protocols of dreams. In the first book<sup>6</sup> published on Schoenberg, Kandinsky called Schoenberg's paintings brain-acts [*Gehirnakte*]. The scars of that revolution of expression, however, are the blots which have fixed themselves, in the music as well as on the paintings, as the messengers of the id against the composer's will--blots that disturb the surface and can no more be wiped away by subsequent correction than the traces of blood in the fairy tale.<sup>7</sup>

If Adorno was right, *Erwartung* has little to do with the voluntary, the conscious, the formal; what counts is the listener's awareness of the leakage of blood from the arteries in the brain. Many of Beckett's fables are meditations on aesthetic problems, extrapolations of theories of art; and in *How it is* Beckett's narrator, himself flayed, avid to flay others, is a caricature of Schoenberg.

In other works of Beckett, the evocative power of music is less overstressed, less parodic. There is a celebrated moment in *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), when Krapp, caught up in a reverie of his youth, sings

Now the day is over,  
Night is drawing nigh-igh,  
Shadows--<sup>8</sup>

Baring-Gould's hymn reverberates, not just through *Krapp's Last Tape*, but over an immense expanse of Beckett's canon: it is also quoted in *Dream of Fair to middling Women*,<sup>9</sup> *Watt*,<sup>10</sup> and *Waiting for Godot*.<sup>11</sup> Beckett may be contemptuous of the Pavlovian processes through which the stimulus of music calls forth a gush of feeling; but it would be hard to deny that "Now the day is over" is to Beckett what Flotow's *M'appari* was to Joyce, a reliable summoner of living memory. We are all of us, from Doris Day to Samuel Beckett, the gulls of Marsyas, ourselves cavities ready to resonate in sympathy to the witchery of music.

Hot music plays an important role in Beckett's writings; but so does cold music, the music of Apollo. In Beckett's first novel, *Dream of Fair to middling Women* (1932; 1992), long unpublished, the narrator arranges his characters to correspond to the twelve notes of the chromatic musical scale:

The fact of the matter is we do not quite know where we are in this story. It is possible that some of our creatures will do their dope all right and give no trouble. And it is certain that others will not. Let us suppose that Nemo is one of those that will not. John, most of the parents, the Smeraldina-Rima, the Syra-Cusa, the Alba . . . are a few of those that will, that stand, that is, for something or can be made to stand for something. . . .

Supposing we told now a little story about China in order to orchestrate what we mean. Yes? Lîng-Liûn then, let us say, went to the confines of the West, to Bamboo Valley, and having cut there a stem between two knots and blown into same was charmed to constate that it gave forth the sound of his own voice when he spoke, as he mostly did, without passion. From this the phoenix male had the kindness to sing six notes and the phoenix female six other notes and Lîng-Liûn the minister cut yet eleven stems to correspond with all that he had heard. Then he remitted the twelve liß-liã to his master, the six liß male phoenix and the six liã female phoenix . . .

Now the point is that it is most devoutly to be hoped that some at least of our characters can be cast for parts in a liß-liã. . . . Then it would only be a question of juggling like Confucius on cubes of jade and playing a tune. If all our characters were

like that--liß-liã-minded--we could write a little book that would be purely melodic, think how nice that would be, linear, a lovely Pythagorean chain-chant solo of cause and effect

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The narrator hopes, or pretends to hope, that a novel can be organized according to the principle of the singing von Trapp family in *The Sound of Music*: tap each little charmer on the head, and he or she will emit a *do* or a *re*, and so forth, and soon a *do* will be will be a deer, a female deer, and *re* a drop of falling sun. But behind this passage lies not Richard Rodgers but Arnold Schoenberg: for here Beckett is parodying the system of twelve-tone composition that Schoenberg devised about ten years before the novel.<sup>13</sup>

In the mid-1920s, Schoenberg tired of being Marsyas and decided to be Apollo. The so-called free-atonal style of *Erwartung* (the style that Schoenberg used from about 1908 to 1913) was intuitive and amorphous, a system for manifesting feeling-traces in the unconscious mind with a sort of electroencephalographic immediacy--as Adorno put it, "The truly subversive moment for him lies the change in the function of musical expression. No longer are passions feigned, but in the medium of music there are registered undissembled the incarnate motions [*leibhafte Regungen*] of the unconscious--shocks, traumata. They assault the taboos of form."<sup>14</sup> Beckett wrote, in praise of Joyce, "His writing is not *about* something; *it is that something itself*"<sup>15</sup>; and Adorno praised the early Schoenberg in almost identical terms, as a composer who did not feign passion, but who discovered the exact sound-equivalents for passion--dissonance that agitates the auditory nerve in precisely the manner that horror makes the hair bristle and the flesh crawl. It is the ultimate goal of Marsyan art: savage authenticity of feeling.

But Schoenberg recoiled from this pit, returned to discipline and irony. The twelve-tone system was ostensibly a means for preventing a formation of a key, a musical center of gravity, within a composition, by legislating a simple principle: you must sound each of the twelve notes of the chromatic scale, the scale that counts every semitone in the octave, before you repeat a note; and you must sound the twelve notes in the same order every time, though they may be gathered up into chords at pleasure. This procedure ensures a kind of unity, in that certain melodic shapes are likely to recur, but it also ensures that that unity will not derive from the

persistence of a tonic note, since no one note has greater prestige or frequency than any other note. But in that this compositional method is highly formal, willed, controlled, it offers a kind of escape from the convulsions of the unconscious; and indeed many of Schoenberg's first twelve-tone compositions were neoclassical exercises in gavottes and rondos, even waltzes, full of disengaged Apollonian decorum.

The narrator of *Dream of Fair to middling Women* seems determined to be detached from his narration, far above the Stream of Consciousness, or the Sewer of Consciousness; he even goes so far as to devise a pre-compositional procedure, a twelve-tone method for story-telling, whereby six male characters and six female characters will be interwoven into an artful tune. Unfortunately, the Apollonian narrator starts to make a botch of things from the beginning. If the method is to work, each character must sound a single note--must be reliably irritable, or flippant, or mournful, or peppy, according to the monotone of his or her character type. But the narrator instead discovers that his fiction no longer inhabits the "chloroformed world" of Balzac or Jane Austen--where the characters are "clockwork cabbages"<sup>16</sup> rigidly obedient to the list of traits and values assigned by the author. The characters drift off pitch:

Pride of place to our boys and girls. Ah these lißs and liäs! How have they stayed the course? Have they been doing their dope? The family, the Alba, the Polar Bear, Chas, that dear friend, and of course Nemo . . . seem almost as good as new, so little have they been plucked and blown and bowed, so little struck with the little hammer. But they will let us down . . . we call the book off, it tails off in a horrid manner. . . . The music comes to pieces. The notes fly about all over the place, a cyclone of electrons.<sup>17</sup>

And when the narrator turns his attention to Belaqua, his hero, he discovers that he has been writing an *Unbildungsroman*:

Belaqua, of all people, to be in such a hotch-potch! Something might yet be saved from the wreck if only he would have the goodness to fix his vibrations and be a liß on the grand scale. But he will not. It is all we can do, when we think of this incommensurate demiurge, not to get into a panic. What is needed of course is a tuning-fork . . . to mix with the treacherous lißs and liäs and get a line on them. . . . Someone like



Watson or Figaro . . . someone who could be always relied on for just the one little squawk, ping!, just right . . . and all might be well.<sup>18</sup>

But, alas, there is no fundamental note, no viable key, in the serial world of this Modernist fiction; Dr. Watson will not fetch the missing clue to Sherlock Holmes, nor will factotum Figaro descend to the correct tonic, *tutto qui sta, son qua, son qua*. But twelve-tone procedures, as well as diatonic procedures, fail where there is no clear definition of pitch. A Beckett character, especially in the early novels, tends to be a creature of a continuous glissando of being, less appropriate to the music of Schoenberg than to the music that John Cage would be writing some years later.

At one point in *Dream of Fair to middling Women*, the narrator actually invokes Apollo for help,<sup>19</sup> but Apollo never seems to come, and the limpid flute music of the lißs and liäs degenerates into chaos. Belaqua expresses a hope to write a book (obviously similar to *Dream of Fair to middling Women*) in which

The experience of my reader shall be between the phrases, in the silence . . . I think of Beethoven . . . I think of his earlier compositions where into the body of the musical statement he incorporates a punctuation of dehiscence, flottements, the coherence gone to pieces, the continuity bitched to hell because the units of continuity have abdicated their unity, they have gone multiple, they fall apart, the notes fly about, a blizzard of electrons; and then vespertine compositions eaten away with terrible silences . . .<sup>20</sup>

Beckett told Axel Kaun in 1937 that he intended to compose verbal surfaces similar to the tone-surfaces in Beethoven's seventh symphony, in which a path of sound is connected over unfathomable abysses of silence.<sup>21</sup> The visual equivalent of Beethoven, for Belaqua, is the Rembrandt of the late self-portraits, "a disfaction, a désuni, an Ungebund . . . a tremor, a tremolo, a disaggregating, a disintegrating, an efflorescence, a breaking down and multiplication of tissue, the corrosive ground-swell of Art."<sup>22</sup> Where Apollo fails, Marsyas leaps in, grinning: Beckett looks at a Rembrandt who has pulled the skin off his own face, and hears a Beethoven who has torn the acoustic membranes off the cavities of silence. It is no wonder that Beethoven became deaf, if he wanted to break music's tympanum, to flay its inner ear.

*Dream of Fair to middling Women* is a novel that decays into expressionism. Just as Molloy carefully arranges his sucking-stones in his pockets, so that he can suck them in a rigid sequence, never sucking one stone twice until he has sucked all sixteen stones in his stone-row, but then tires of the stones and scatters them,<sup>23</sup> so the narrator of the earlier novel arranges his twelve characters according to a nice melodic model, but then scatters them into a heap of meaningless discords. First the narrator plays with characters stripped down to the shape of pebbles or notes; then he gets bored or exasperated, and *expresses* his boredom or exasperation in the crash of the system. Expression exists, not on the level of the sob or the laugh or any other local aspect of the text, but on the level of the untenability of any coordinating structure. Apollo can't keep his instrument properly tuned, and Marysas, somewhere in the background, leers.

There is a moment in the novel *Murphy* when Celia listens to Murphy's puzzling speech and feels "spattered with words that went dead as soon as they sounded; each word obliterated, before it had time to make sense, by the word that came next . . . It was like difficult music heard for the first time."<sup>24</sup> This is an important clue for the literary critic, since it confesses that Beckett's syntax is often governed by models derived from music.

This is true of all phases of Beckett's career. Beckett's last work (evidently) is a piece called *What is the Word* (1990):

folly seeing all this this here--

for to--

what is the word--

see--

glimpse--

seem to glimpse--

need to seem to glimpse--

folly for the need to seem to glimpse--<sup>25</sup>

This piece uses several compositional procedures, one of which is the principle of additive construction, well known through such songs as *This is the house that Jack built*, or *I got me a*

wife, or the fool's song in Arthur Sullivan's *The Yeoman of the Guard*. (As a boy, Beckett delighted in inventing "irreverent, ribald" words to Gilbert and Sullivan tunes.<sup>26</sup>) It differs in that every addition in the domain of syntax is a subtraction in the domain of meaning, for the word *see* is endlessly qualified and darkened, first dimmed into *glimpse*, then weakened into *seem to glimpse*, and so forth. But Beckett's career nevertheless ended with a patter song.

Beckett's fullest deconstruction of language occurs in the third part of *Watt* (1942-25; 1953), where speech is turned into whord-whizz through all kinds of musical procedures, chiefly through piecemeal retrograde, first on the level of sentences or sentence fragments, finally on the level of phonemes: "Dis yb dis, nem owt. Yad la, tin for trap. Skin, skin, skin. Od su did ned taw? On. . . . Nilb, mun, mud. Tin for trap, yad la. Nem owt, dis yb dis."<sup>27</sup> This can be translated as "Side by side, two men. All day, part of night. Nix, nix, nix. What then did us do? No. . . . Blind, numb, dumb. Part of night, all day. Two men, side by side." The reversal intensifies the chant-like quality of the text, as if it were a liturgy in an unknown language; and on the level of semantics, even in a much disabled state, the pathos of the phrase "Blind, numb, dumb" is oddly enhanced by mushy, pebbles-in-mouth feel of "Nilb, mun, mud," even before it is quite deciphered.

Reading this is like hearing difficult music for the first time. Now, let us see whether hearing difficult music is like reading Beckett. There exist a good many musical compositions based on Beckett texts, by Philip Glass, Morton Feldman, Heinz Holliger, and others. Many of these settings use restricted musical means in imitation of Beckett's restricted theatrical and verbal means--a minimalism that sometimes tends to heighten the Apollonian quality of Beckett's aesthetic. For example, Glass's incidental music (1965) to Beckett's *Play* (1963) consists of "two lines, each played by soprano saxophone, having only two notes so that each line represented an alternating, pulsing interval. When combined, these two intervals (they were written in two different repeating rhythms) formed a shifting pattern of sounds that stayed within the four pitches of the two intervals."<sup>28</sup> This continuous underlay of sound imitates the spareness and stark formality of *Play*, without any attempt to trace any "dramatic" trajectory of recognition and revelation. In some of his later music to Beckett texts, Glass makes some

attempt at expressivity: his second string quartet (1982), composed as incidental music to a performance of Beckett's *Company* (1980), consists of four terse gestures, sometimes harsh, sometimes lyrical--minimalism minimized. But Glass seems less effective as Marsyas than in his usual mode of luminous disengagement. At the beginning of the genre of opera, Claudio Monteverdi wrote that there were three musical styles, *stile molle* (sweet and abject), *stile temperato* (calm, neutral), and *stile concitato* (excited and proud, warlike). Glass's *stile concitato* is wretched, and his *stile molle* a doubtful thing; but his *stile temperato* is one of the twentieth century's impressive achievements.

Sometimes composers try to make their music Beckett-like by writing lots of scales, in the belief that such musical simplicities conform well to Beckett's simplicities of staging and diction. Usually these scales are descending, in honor of Beckett's famous narrowings of affect and droopings of mood. This procedure has the sanction of Beckett himself, who wrote out, at the end of *Watt*, a dogged tune for the song about the blooming withering and the big fat buns, a sort of psychotic passacaglia consisting of the notes of the B minor scale descending from G to B, repeated over and over, until at last we hear a rising D major scale that ends with the crackpot note A<.<sup>29</sup> Marsyas provides a single out-of-key shriek after after Apollo plays his dutiful scales. Among the pieces of Beckett music oriented to scalar effects, we find György Kurtág's *Samuel Beckett--What is the Word* (1990-91). In the score, Kurtág notes that his composition is a "message from Samuel Beckett to Ildikó Monyók," a Hungarian actress who had to re-learn language after she was struck dumb from a road accident in 1982.<sup>30</sup> Kurtág set a Hungarian translation of Beckett's text for reciter and soprano, with choral echoes of the English original; the basic musical material is a descending chromatic scale, but there is some screaming as well. In this way Kurtág tries to be faithful to the structural rigidity of Beckett's prose, and to the implied terror of loss--loss of a particular word, loss of language, loss of mind. Sometimes Kurtág's techniques are effective: for example, at one place the syllable *mi* (Hungarian for *what*) detaches itself from the phrase *mi is a szó* [*what is the word*] and gets intoned on a single note (*mi-mi-mi-mi*) in a demented parody of a singing lesson. But Kurtág's screams aren't very shocking, and he does little with Beckett's opportunities for additive construction. Also, I wonder

if Kurtág hasn't made a mistake in linking Beckett's text with the brain damage of a certain actress--for Beckett, the defect embodied in *What is the Word* pertains not to a private injury but to language itself. If Kurtág's approach were correct, the pathos of *Play*, in which Beckett squashed his actors into urns, would be heightened if the drama were performed by quadruple amputees.

Also scalar in general technique is Morton Feldman's music (1987) for Beckett's *Words and Music* (1962). This radio play originally had music by John Beckett (cousin of Samuel), but the collaborators weren't satisfied with the result, and Beckett was curious to hear what Feldman could do--Beckett and Feldman had already worked together on *Neither* (1977). The premise of *Words and Music* is that an old man in carpet slippers, Croak, has two servants, one Words, the other Music, who invoke, at Croak's command, the memories that haunt him. We are given to understand that neither servant is entirely competent or cooperative, but Words seems a fussier, more disagreeable character, full of obvious blather, overtly hostile to Music. Music, on the other hand, is swift, salient, focused, prehensile; Words can only stumble along behind. (Beckett occasionally indulged in slight sentimentalization of music, as in his play *Nacht und Träume*, an homage to the incantatory power of Schubert's song; but at other times Beckett knew that music is just as fallen as any other form of art.) In the early part of the play, Feldman tried to follow the moodiness of Music, by writing soft euphonies to indicate Music in a state of humble obedience, or, to represent the halting gait of old age, irregular pizzicati; but these faint gestures at Marsyan expressivity almost entirely fade away by the big set piece, the song "Age is when to a man,"<sup>31</sup> an almost perfectly Apollonian composition, full of rising and falling gapped scales. Just before the song starts--as Words is fooling around with possible phrases, and Music is improvising possible tunes--Music plays a falling scalar figure quite similar to the opening plinks of Stravinsky's ballet *Orpheus* (1948), a representation of the apotheosis of the lyre, Pythagorean perfection. Feldman once said that he was interested in the way in which time existed before human beings got their dirty hands on it<sup>32</sup>; and this transcendental, dehumanized time, time as Apollo feels it, seemed to Feldman the best response to Beckett's text. In the play, Music in some sense remains Croak's cringing servant; but Feldman contradicts this, in that *his*

Music liberates itself from all servitude, from the inconvenience of expression.

We see, then, that a number of composers have tried to be faithful to the whole strange Beckettian dialectic of Marysas and Apollo, expressionism and its opposite. But the most successful attempt I know is Earl Kim's *Earthlight* (1978), a *Romanza* for high soprano, muted violin, and piano,<sup>33</sup> based on texts from several sources in Beckett, but principally from the undone, defunged language of parts of *Watt*. Kim was a pupil of Schoenberg's, and much of the piece dwells in a Schoenbergian twilight, a state intermediate between expressionism and irony. The soprano makes great swooning chromatic runs:

[Ex. 1: Score of *Earthlight*, p. 22]

and yet we are always conscious of singer articulating a series of notes, making exact placements of pitches in an artful manner. This is felt less as a shriek than as someone regarding a shriek with a certain studious detachment. Much of *Earthlight* is like this, a curious inspection of devices used, from early opera onward, as resources of expressivity. Monteverdi wrote in 1624 that he had discovered the exact musical correlative of anger, the *stile concitato*, a sort of stutter of sixteenth-notes; Kim obligingly provides a sample of this symbol of anger, but bleaches it into an abstraction, as if someone on the moon were looking down at earth, trying to comprehend the peculiar emotion of anger:

[Ex. 2: score of *Earthlight*, p. 10]

Beckett wrote in 1949, in his *Three Dialogues*, that the progress of Western art was an attempt to find "more authentic, more ample, less exclusive relations" between the art work and its model in the real world; but these relations are illusory, false, and so Beckett applauds Bram van Velde as the first painter to "submit wholly to the incoercible absence of relation . . . to admit that to be an artist is to fail."<sup>34</sup> Presumably a piece of music, like a painting, also has nothing to do with its ostensible model in the domain of human feeling, such as agony or anger. Kim seems to agree with this line of argument: *Earthlight* illustrates the failure of musical devices to constitute genuine expression, by erasing the semantic content of the old Monteverdian-Wagnerian gestures of emotion. We must learn to hear a chromatic run as a chromatic run, not as pain liquefied into sound. Marsyas is evoked only to be banished.

The piano part of the second example consists of only four notes, F<, C<, A, and G, and this suggests the extreme musical economy of certain aspects of *Earthlight*. Even the notion of a fourth pitch is almost superfluous: *Earthlight* is to a large extent a fantasia on the three notes C<, D<, and A, intoned on the violin at the opening of the piece:

[Ex. 3: score of *Earthlight*, p. 3]

Sometimes Kim seems to be using these three notes (or three similar notes) as a cramped, constricted tone-row, stunned into a sort of stupor; but at other times he keeps investigating permutations of three notes, playing them in the orders 1-2-3, 1-3-2, 3-1-2, and so forth--rather like Mr. Endon, the schizophrenic in *Murphy*, who can entertain himself endlessly by pushing three buttons in various sequences.<sup>35</sup> At one point Kim amuses himself by creating a grid, a single bar in which violin, soprano, and piano play a game of musical magic square with the pitches F, F<, and G, which I will name 1, 2, and 3 respectively:

**violin:** 123 132 312 321 231 213 1

**soprano:** 312 321 231 213 123 132 3

**piano:** 231 213 123 132 312 321 2

[Ex. 4: score of *Earthlight*, p. 18]

But these jam-packed, overstressed symmetries--the pastimes of a psychotic Apollo--tend to disappear almost as soon as they appear. Just as Beckett likes to pursue a game and then scatter the pieces over the board, so Kim plays so many different, mutually hostile games with the music that one passage tends to cancel out the previous passage. Sometimes Kim is a strict serialist, manipulating a twelve-tone row with complete rigor:

[Ex. 5: score of *Earthlight*, p. 16]

This is the strict Schoenbergian method, but completely drained of all melodic pattern, in a way quite foreign to Schoenberg's own procedure. In another passage Kim uses, not the chromatic scale, not the diatonic scale (*do-re-mi-fa-sol-la-ti-do*), but a peculiar scale called the octatonic scale, consisting of alternate whole-tones and semi-tones--in a manner that seems to allude to the flute-runs in the *danse sacrée* of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*,<sup>36</sup> and perhaps with some half-neutralized sense of sacrificial violence behind it:

[Ex. 6: score of *Earthlight*, p. 18]

This is the scale that Rimsky-Korsakov used to illustrate supernatural evil, such as the demon sorcerer Kashchei in his opera *Kashchei the Immortal* (1902). Octatonic thinking can be seen at several points of Kim's score--even the basic C<-D<-A cell can be understood as a selection from the octatonic scale--but there is no sense of supernatural evil. Kim is concerned, not with semantic intensification, but with semantic neutralization.<sup>37</sup> *Earthlight* is a profoundly polyglot piece, speaking many different musical languages, a Babel of tongues. Cell construction, twelve-tone construction, octatonic construction all confront one another, without any very obvious master syntax that can coordinate them. Just as *Watt* undoes verbal language, so *Earthlight* untwists the procedures of musical speech, though Kim's musical gibberish has a certain elegance not to be found in *Watt*'s knotty aphasias.

Perhaps the finest section in *Earthlight* instructs the soprano to sing some of the backward language of *Watt*, a vocal line consisting of only three pitches:

[Ex. 7: score of *Earthlight*, p. 23]

These are the three basic pitches of the piece, D<, A, and C<. But if there is any sequence here, I am unable to find it; Kim might have tossed a die to determine the contour of the line. The melody also pays no attention to the words: the word *little* may be stressed on the *lit*, it may be stressed on the *tle*, it is no matter. And the grace notes are in no sense graceful, but only contribute more angularity, more arbitrary contortion, to the vocal line. This investigation of the operations of chaos within a set with few items is an extremely Beckett-like procedure--as when Murphy swoons with delight to think that he can eat his six biscuits in one hundred twenty different sequences, if only he can abolish his preference for the ginger biscuit, and his dislike for the anonymous biscuit.<sup>38</sup> And Kim has also assisted Beckett by estranging the language of *Watt* from normal English: the extremely disjunct soprano imposes her own musical alienation on the already alienated text. Apollo seems to triumph, in that the expressiveness of language is largely disabled: mumbled words about the poverty of being have been transformed into atonal fanfares. But even here Marsyas is not altogether absent: Kim marked this section *con tenerezza* [with tenderness], although this is not an easy instruction for the soprano to obey.



*Earthlight* is extraordinarily sensitive to the music latent in Beckett's adventurous syntax. But there is another kind of music in Beckett's writings: a music in the structure of event. Especially in his later works, Beckett adapted his plots from musical structures; indeed the strangely evacuated, incidentless textures of the plots often reflect the circularity, the unprogressiveness of certain musical structures. Like Schoenberg, Beckett ultimately became a somewhat grim Apollo.

We have seen that part of *How it is* are governed by Marsyas, insofar as each naked crawler becomes a sort of pipe organ of torture. But on a more global level, *How it is* shows the presence of Apollo: the novel is structured like a canon. A canon is a composition like *Row, row, row your boat*, in which the same tune is sung out of phase with itself: the harmony is derived from the overlappings of the melody. In *How it is*, the concept of overlapping is bizarrely literalized: a Bom hoists himself onto a Pim; ultimately the Pim will escape and hoist himself onto someone else; and a man will crawl up from the rear and hoist himself onto the Bom, making the old Bom a new Pim. All the screams ultimately are sounded in a mathematically predetermined pattern; to a giant ear in the sky, the shrieks would ultimately have a certain canonic aspect. Hot music becomes cold at a sufficient distance. In *Watt* there are three frogs, one krakking on a count of eight, the second krekking on a count of five, and the third krikking on a count of three. All keep croaking away in a state of blithe disregard of one another: the far-off ear can delight in the symmetry of chaos itself, for after one hundred twenty counts a unison will occur, a simultaneous krak-krek-krik.<sup>39</sup>

Musical plot-lines are especially prominent in the short plays. *Ghost Trio* (1977) is explicitly modeled after the *largo* of Beethoven's piano trio Op. 70/1: the events--the closing of a door, the recession of footfalls--are coordinated, bar by bar, to Beethoven's score. The eeriness of the music, which has little sense of forward motion, is reflected in the faintness of the images of this television opera, which scarcely seem to register against the background gray of the picture tube. For an example of strict canon turned into a dramatic procedure, we can turn to *What Where* (1983): in this play a set of four characters enact a rigidly determined sequence of

interrogation and torture, the torturer in one module always becoming the victim in the next. Beckett's plays sometimes aspire to be a frozen music, in which random screams are anesthetized into some tolerable and witty structure of pain, as if both the torturer and the victim had become connoisseurs of their sad art. In the end, Apollo is the victor over Marsyas in Beckett's works, even more profoundly than in Ovid: for Marsyas learns to derive a certain wan satisfaction from the formal designs of the knife-strokes in his flesh. As a young writer, satirist and satyr, Beckett illustrated the collapse of form; as an old writer, Beckett found ways of showing that Apollonian formal invariance could be as purposeless and bleak as formlessness itself. In a system with few elements--and Beckett's systems are always limited--chaos can be fully displayed in an orderly table of permutations, an orderliness that offers no relief from disorder, for it is one with it.

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1. Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings*, tr. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1964), p. 147.
  2. William Butler Yeats, *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954), p. 758.
  3. Wolf-Dieter Dube, *The Expressionists* (New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 1985), p. 181.
  4. Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (New York: Grove Press, 1957), pp. 195, 74, 141, 75, 117-18.
  5. Samuel Beckett, *How it is* (New York: Grove Press, 1964), p. 69.
  6. Arnold Schönberg (1912), ed. Alban Berg et al., reprinted in *Arnold Schoenberg / Wassily Kandinsky / Letters, Pictures and Documents*, ed. Jelena Hahl-Koch, p. 125.
  7. Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophie der neuen Musik* (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1966), p. 43.
  8. Samuel Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape and Other Dramatic Pieces* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), p. 17.
  9. Samuel Beckett, *Dream of Fair to middling Women*, ed. Eoin O'Brien and Edith Fournier (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1992), p. 134.
  10. Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), p. 57.
  11. Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Press, 1954), p. 55.
  12. Samuel Beckett, *Dream of Fair to middling Women*, ed. Eoin O'Brien and Edith Fournier (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1992), pp. 9-10. I have consulted a native speaker of Mandarin and Cantonese, Su Yin Mak (to whose wisdom this paper as a whole owes a great deal), concerning Beckett's lißs and liäs: these syllables evidently have no relevant meaning in Chinese (though the name Liu, as in Puccini's *Turandot*, means *willow*), but are merely suggestive, bird-like, pseudo-oriental cries, suitable for Beckett's male and female phoenixes.
  13. Beckett listened to Schoenberg carefully and was aware of certain resemblances between his art and Schoenberg's, as he told the interviewer John Gruen:  
I think perhaps I have freed myself from certain formal concepts. Perhaps, like the composer Schoenberg or the painter Kandinsky, I have turned toward an abstract language. Unlike them, however, I have tried not to concretize the abstraction--not to give it yet another formal context. (*Vogue*, December 1969, p. 210)  
But it is arguable that, in such late works as *What Where* (1983), Beckett *did* concretize the abstraction by confining it in rigid formal modules.
  14. Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophie der neuen Musik* (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt,

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1966), p. 42.

15. Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. Ruby Cohn (New York: Grove Press, 1984), p. 27.

16. Samuel Beckett, *Dream of Fair to middling Women*, ed. Eoin O'Brien and Edith Fournier (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1992), pp. 119, 120.

17. Samuel Beckett, *Dream of Fair to middling Women*, ed. Eoin O'Brien and Edith Fournier (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1992), pp. 112-13..

18. Samuel Beckett, *Dream of Fair to middling Women*, ed. Eoin O'Brien and Edith Fournier (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1992), p. 125.

19. Samuel Beckett, *Dream of Fair to middling Women*, ed. Eoin O'Brien and Edith Fournier (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1992), p. 112.

20. Samuel Beckett, *Dream of Fair to middling Women*, ed. Eoin O'Brien and Edith Fournier (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1992), pp. 138-39.

21. Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. Ruby Cohn (New York: Grove Press, 1984), p. 53. Beckett called Beethoven's seventh "the dearest of the nine"; in 1935 he objected to the disintegration of formal structures in a Furtwängler performance of the seventh--a odd criticism, since disintegration of formal structures is exactly what Beckett seemed to prize in Beethoven himself, but a useful reminder of Beckett's uneasiness with the aesthetic of Marysas. See James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), pp. 406, 184.

22. Samuel Beckett, *Dream of Fair to middling Women*, ed. Eoin O'Brien and Edith Fournier (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1992), pp. 138-39.

23. Samuel Beckett, *Three Novels* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), pp. 69-74.

24. Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (New York: Grove Press, 1957), p. 40.

25. Samuel Beckett, *As the Story was Told: Uncollected and Late Prose* (London: John Calder, 1990), p. 132.

26. James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), p. 45.

27. Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), p. 168.

28. Philip Glass, *Music by Philip Glass* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), p. 19.

29. Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), pp. 254, 34.

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30. Cited in Paolo Petazzi's notes to Deutsche Grammophon compact disc 437 840-2, p. 4.
31. Samuel Beckett, *Collected Shorter Plays* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1984), p. 131.
32. Cited in the notes to the recording of *Words and Music*, Montaigne MO 782084, p. 3.
33. The score of *Earthlight* is published by Mobart Music Publications, Hillsdale, New York. Most of the Beckett texts chosen by Kim concern darkening, fading, the deepening of apathy, the mind's surrender to what it cannot grasp. The score of *Earthlight* contains cues for spotlights, and Kim intended the collapse of the expressionistic devices in his music to be accompanied by literal darkening of the performers. This discussion of *Earthlight* is indebted to an audacious analytic prose-poem that the composer Elaine Barkin delivered at the University of Virginia.
34. Martin Esslin, ed., *Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1965), p. 16. This essay is also reproduced in *Disjecta*, but the text in my copy is corrupt at this point. See Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. Ruby Cohn (New York: Grove Press, 1984), p. 145.
35. Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (New York: Grove Press, 1957), p. 247.
36. See Richard Taruskin, *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions: A Biography of the Works Through Mavra* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 938.
37. It should be noted that this semantic neutralization is partly accomplished through Kim's reliance on symmetrical divisions of the octave. All symmetrical divisions of the octave, such as the chromatic scale, the whole-tone scale, and the set of consecutive minor thirds (of which the octatonic scale is a further refinement), tend to create a destabilized and incoherent musical space, since a tonic note is most easily perceived in such asymmetrical environments as the diatonic scale. Kim's basic C<-D<-A figure belongs to both the whole-tone scale and the octatonic scale: it is therefore disoriented on either one of two axes.
38. Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (New York: Grove Press, 1957), p. 97.
39. Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), p. 137.